THE OLD AND THE NEW

It was a perfect early summer evening in the town of Willoughby, Pennsylvania. The temperature was in the low 80's and there was not a cloud in the sky. In the town of Willoughby was a park that featured a white gazebo large enough to support musical ensembles of many sizes. Among the largest of these ensembles was the Brandywine Valley Community Band, a summer park band made up of a wide range of people that included professionals, amateurs, and players somewhere between those two extremes. Most of the people in the band were paid small fees for concerts only from money that came from individual donations. No one was paid for the weekly rehearsals. At the time, there were eighty members of the band, which gave a total of seven concerts a summer, all at the Willoughby gazebo. The band had an excellent conductor named Anthony Hillman. His dynamism and pleasant manner in between pieces was a major reason for the large audiences that regularly attended the concerts.

Steve Weinberg, still slim and youthful at aged forty-four and a member of the Brandywine Valley Community Band's French horn section, was sitting on a bench in front of the gazebo. He had a conservatory background and, thus was good enough to be paid by the band. But he never won any of the five orchestra auditions he took, even though none of those orchestras paid a living wage. On the rebound, he got a job as a computer programmer. At this point in his life he played mostly for fun, although he was happy to accept the pennies.

It was 6:00 PM, two hours before the concert. Darkness would soon descend upon Willoughby. Other than a few picnickers, no one was in the park with him. But Steve liked to be early. This way, he could park his car, have a light supper, and warm up at his leisure. He preferred to be as relaxed as possible before a gig and rushing to make it minutes before the downbeat wasn't fun. So he sat, his black horn case at his side, as he drank a diet soda and waited for more band members and more of the audience to arrive.

No sooner did he take a sip than an elderly gentleman approached him. He walked slowly and was somewhat stooped. Clean-shaven with weathered skin, he wore a blue dress shirt and white pants. Steve, who, like all of the band members, was wearing a white dress shirt, black pants and black shoes, could not figure out how old he was, although the man was clearly older than his septuagenarian father.

"You play French horn, I see," said the old man.

"I do indeed," said Steve in as pleasant a voice as possible. A band member must be outgoing to audience members, not that Steve did not try to be that way all the time.

"I played horn, too. Many years ago, in the Philadelphia Symphony.

"Really?" exclaimed Steve, assuming the man was telling the truth. "That's just great! What is your name? Maybe I have heard of you."

"I'm Richard Stone. I put in about a decade in the orchestra before deciding to step down and open a business."

"I haven't heard of you. When did you play in the Symphony?"

"Back in the forties and early fifties, under Rabinski."

"No kidding?" said Steve, "He was one of my favorite conductors."

"Oh, I can tell you stories about him. I can tell you lots of stories."

"I'm all ears," replied Steve, with genuine interest. He then motioned for Richard to sit with him on the bench, which the old man did.

"I was on third horn. It was me and Dick Stewart on first, Marty Rosenbaum on assistant first, Mike Stevens on second, and we had Dave Millard on fourth."

"I recognize several of those names," said Steve. "I certainly know Dick Stewart. He was in the Symphony forever. He was one of my favorites."

"He was one of the good ones, all right," Richard concurred. "He and I, we attended the Philly Institute at the same time. We graduated the same year, 1942."

"That was the year he was hired, wasn't it?" asked Steve.

"Right," said Richard appreciatively. "You've done your homework. I joined a year later, after a season with the Philly Ballet Orchestra."

"Nice. How long were you in the Symphony?"

"From '43 to '53. I left to start a business."

"If you don't mind my asking," Steve said cautiously, "why did you leave the orchestra to start a business?"

"I got tired of playing and practicing every day. It's a grind. It's not for everybody. Not that I didn't enjoy it for awhile."

Steve wondered whether Richard might have been fired. Back then, before the unions had much power, an orchestra musician could lose his job on any given day. He decided, though, not to press the old gentleman. It wouldn't have been right, obviously.

"Anyway," continued Richard, "I have my memories."

“Any Rabinski stories you would like to share?” queried Steve, still very interested.

“He was a tough man,” began Richard, “but a great conductor. He was good with Russian music and some of the Germans. A lot of guys in the orchestra didn’t like him, though. Sometimes he’d fire the wrong guy. Then, when he found out that he made a mistake, the wrong guy stayed fired anyway.”

“Ooh! Those were the days, all right.”

“It didn’t happen often, but it happened. Back then, conductors had total authority over everything.”

“Well, the results sounded good, at least on records,” Steve continued. “I particularly admire his Prokofiev Fifth and Alexander Nevsky.”

“That was after my time in the orchestra was over. You can hear me on older recordings, from before the stereo era. Not many of them have been released on CD, though. I have some LPs.”

“I do have a record player still,” stated Steve. “I rarely use it, but if I come across an old Philly recording, I’ll give it a listen. I know third horn parts pretty well, at least in orchestral music.”

“Thank you for that.”

“You’re quite welcome,” said Steve. By this time, he was convinced that Mr. Stone was telling the truth. He certainly seemed sharp at his age. He was probably over ninety.

“Anyway,” continued Richard, “We had fun for the most part, the five of us. Dick Stewart was a great section leader.”

“He had a good sound, at least in my opinion.”

“Have you come across people who disagree?” asked Richard, his voice rising a little.

“Well, back when I was a student at the Rochester Conservatory,” began Steve carefully, “there were a lot of people who tended to reject the old-time players. I hasten to add that I’m not one of them.”

“Why do people reject us?”

“It was the old argument that it was easier to get an orchestral job back then since there were more playing opportunities than now. As a result, musicians were hired who did not have the technique that today’s players do.”

“Give me a break!” thundered Richard, his face turning slightly red. “Dick Stewart never missed a note or an entrance in his life! You’re gonna tell me that he had bad technique?”

“I wouldn’t, but some of my teachers and classmates would.” Steve was good natured and did not want to offend anyone, much less a horn player who played in a major orchestra. Besides, you do not upset an audience member.

Richard shook his head. “There was nothing wrong with his technique, or anybody else’s. Every orchestra has a few flaws, today’s orchestras as well as past ones. But you couldn’t be onstage in the Philly Symphony if you couldn’t play.”

“I know that,” said Steve. “I’m just reporting what I’ve heard.”

“And what else have you heard?” asked the old orchestra veteran, still with a trace of anger - not at Steve, or so Steve hoped.

“That today’s musicians can do more with their instruments than yesterday’s.”

“Look, kid,” began Richard, “That just isn’t true. Okay, today’s players often can play anything you put on their stands. And maybe they can play higher or lower, faster, louder. But what about character? What about personality?”

“What about a signature sound?” chimed in Steve.

“Exactly!” said Richard. “Back in the old days, you could identify most orchestras by their sounds without being told ahead of time.”

“It’s true that almost every orchestra sounds the same these days.”

“In my day, you could turn on the radio in the middle of a symphony and know who it was.”

“That was certainly was the case with your orchestra.” The Philly Symphony was famous for its rich string sound, among other things.

“Yeah,” continued Richard. “Now, orchestras are usually homogeneous, in tune, play with a full tone and good precision, but they all sound the same.”

“I wonder why that is,” said Steve.

“There are all sorts of reasons for it,” answered Richard in a serious tone, “some of them understandable, others kind of a shame. I suppose when you have so many people auditioning, you have to go with the guy that doesn’t miss notes and plays in tune.”

“Machines,” said Steve, who was never able to play like one, hence his failure to win an orchestra job.

“When I auditioned,” Richard continued, “it was a mere formality. The job was mine to lose. Only seven other horn players went for it.”

“Was it true that conductors often hired people unilaterally?” asked Steve.

“That happened, too. That may have been another reason why orchestras sounded more distinct back then.”

“I understand,” said Steve. “Conductors had total control and were able to mold an orchestra’s sound more than they can today.”

“Nowadays, the other orchestra members play as big a role in hiring people. Sometimes, music directors do not even attend auditions.”

“But there were some downsides to all this.” Steve stated, finding himself enjoying this conversation. “Back then, musicians could be fired on the spot.”

“That’s too true,” replied Richard.

“And they certainly weren’t earning then what they are earning now, at least in Philly.”

“Yeah. You had to scramble around in order to supplement your income. One of the clarinet players worked at the toll booth on the Ben Franklin Bridge.”

“I wonder if any of the drivers recognized him.”

Richard laughed, “It would have been interesting if they had!”

Steve laughed as well, then queried, “How did you supplement your income?”

“I did some free-lance playing and went to school. It was how I was able to start a business and do well in it. You probably need to do other things besides this band.”

Steve laughed again and said, “Oh, this band doesn’t exactly pay big bucks. I’m a computer programmer who plays here and there largely for fun.”

“Did you go back to school to study computers?”

“Didn’t have to. I was always good with technology.”

“But you tried to win an orchestra job after you graduated from music school?”

“I took a few auditions. Never made it past the first round.”

“Oh well,” said Richard, “It would be nice if there were more bands around like this one.”

“We are among the last,” answered Steve. “There used to be more park bands, but the unions don’t have the money like they used to. So a lot of bands have died over the years.”

“What a shame!” said Richard with emotion, “ It used to be that a lot of towns had a summer band. May I ask, do you get paid?”

“We earn small fees thanks largely to donations.”

“So this is not a union gig?” asked Richard.

“No,” replied Steve. “It used to be.”

“Why do you think this band has survived?”

“I don’t know. We do have a good conductor. Anyway, it would be nice if it lasted longer.”

“You look at orchestras that have folded over the years. Some come back, some don’t. These things shouldn’t happen.”

"Agreed," said Steve. "Sometimes I think that people just aren't interested in good music anymore."

"Yeah," continued Richard. "They listen to that horrible stuff. Rap, and so forth. I've long felt that rap music is the result of too many people not being introduced to Mozart."

"Mozart is one of my favorite composers," Steve interjected. "You're right on many levels. Schools are cutting down on music programs."

"And you have to dig, dig, dig with your remote to find classical music on television."

"All those stations," Steve intoned with drama in his voice, "and still… nothing on!"

"Young people are not being exposed to the good things. It could end up being the death of classical music."

"It could be the end of culture entirely."

"Well," said Richard, "I don't think that culture is going to disappear too soon. The problem is that more needs to be done to bring it to the public."

"Such as?"

"Look at Europe. There's lots of culture over there. Europeans get more than their fair share of good music and art - on television as well as in the concert hall."

"I've heard that."

"Which leads to my opinion that there needs to be more government support for culture. If they can do it in Europe, we can do it here, too. Why can't we have govern-

ment funding for the arts? We need a European system of disseminating culture. It will certainly ensure that orchestras and everything else stay alive."

"Well, sir," Steve said in a deliberately friendly voice, "We're going to have to agree to disagree. I don't think the European way of doing things is a good idea. Socialism does do a good job of supporting the arts. But, as Margaret Thatcher said, eventually you run out of money. However, I certainly respect your opinion and acknowledge that you're not alone."

"You don't say?" replied Richard. Then after a brief pause, he said to Steve, "Goodbye."

As Richard got up, Steve said, "So long, sir. Great to talk to you."

Richard said nothing. He got up off the bench and slowly walked away. Steve figured the man was probably tired from all of that talking, at least he told himself that was the case. Steve greatly hoped that he had not offended him. He did feel kind of bad. Maybe he shouldn't have responded to Richard's remark the way he did. Maybe he should have pretended to agree. Maybe next time, if there is a next time, he will. Politics will always be a sensitive issue with most people. As Steve said to Richard, socialism does do a good job of supporting the arts. But, Steve asked himself, is the American system truly capable of better things with culture? Maybe at one point it was. But now?

After he watched Richard leave the gazebo, walking away with a slight limp, it was back to business for Steve. Musicians and audience members were gathering and it was about time for him to prepare to play his collection of off-beats and occasional melodic lines. He finished his meal. Then, as he put his horn together and began to warm

up, Steve wondered if he would have made the same decision Richard had made had he won a full-time orchestra job and played every day for a living. The old man was probably right – it can be a grind. A couple of times a week suited Steve, as did his computer programming job. There is glamour involved when you play in a 52-week symphony orchestra. But it probably isn't for everybody, be they musicians or concertgoers.

We'll see, thought Steve, how long these ensembles last into the new millennium. For decades, some brain surgeons have predicted the death of the American orchestra. Give or take the occasional orchestra that folds and never comes back, these same brain surgeons have always been wrong. Hopefully, they will continue to be wrong. Anyhow, it was nice that his little park band was still around. Time to make music.